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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004869

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SUBJECT: MAYSAN POLITICAL LEADER DISCUSSES SHIA ELECTORAL POLITICS

REF: BAGHDAD 4843

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT S. FORD, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: A prominent tribal leader from Maysan, who won a TNA seat on the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) list in January and has decided to join Ali al-Dabbagh's party as a candidate in this month's election, told poloff December 5 that there are no policy differences between the UIA and Dabbagh's "Qualified Iraqis Party." The difference between the two is "technical"; those with Dabbagh are perceived to be independent of the main political parties on the UIA. He said Dabbagh's team is prepared to join the UIA block in the next government. He also confirmed reports that individual Sadrists have joined Shia slates other than the UIA, and said Muqtadah al-Sadr would not issue a statement in support of the UIA. He claimed election fraud would be limited to the actions of individuals, and downplayed reports of electoral violence. (In a separate conversation December 5 with Dabbagh, however, the party leader expressed genuine concern about disruptive UIA electoral activities, which he fears will undermine the credibility of the election.) Sharing other views, Saadoun argued that the marjaiyah maintained primary influence over the Shia south, stronger than the tribes, and dismissed the electoral prospects of Iyad Allawi. He said the security situation in Maysan had improved once the Sadrists gained political power, and acknowledged increased Iranian influence since 2004. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Shia Coalitions. Poloff met December 5 with Shaykh Mohamed al-Saadoun, an al-Amarah resident and leader of the Saadoun tribe. Saadoun, a UIA member of the current National Assembly, said he had joined Ali al-Dabbagh's new party and is the party's first candidate on Maysan's list. He described the original UIA as 75 percent political party and 25 percent independent. For "technical reasons," the independent members had joined Dabbagh's "Qualified Iraqis Party" to run in the elections for the new government. Poloff asked him to define independent; did he mean independent from Iran? Saadoun clarified that Dabbagh's group is independent from the political parties, but shares the same political program. Dabbagh's party is prepared to join the UIA in the new government, and Saadoun predicted that the UIA would gain the largest share of Shia votes because it is well-known, identified with Sistani, and dominates the media. But he predicted that Dabbagh's party would do well with voters who seek a change from the dominant Shia political parties, and predicted the Islamist Coalition (a group of Karbala-based religious politicians) would also pick up votes. Saadoun said Dabbagh had chosen individuals like himself, who are personally prominent in their communities, in the 16 provinces where the party is running.

¶3. (C) Leader more critical. List leader Dabagh has been far more critical of the Shia alliance in separate private conversations with poloff. He accused the UIA of tearing down his campaign posters, and told poloff that the UIA has hired cars fitted with loudspeakers to patrol the streets of Karbala and make false announcements that Dabagh has withdrawn his candidacy and now backs the "555" (UIA) slate. Dabagh has rejected that notion in public. He told poloff that he is trying to cast himself as a modern technocrat who can solve problems with economic development. Still, he is discouraged, and said he expects extensive fraud and controversy after the elections. "I'm very worried by what I'm seeing inside the (Shia) coalition," Dabagh told poloff. Poloff replied that he was worried, too. Dabagh shot back, "You haven't seen what I've seen. I'm ten times more worried than you. I don't know what they're trying to build here."

¶4. (C) Sadr Role and Electoral Environment. Saadoun, who was known to poloff to be sympathetic to Sadr in 2004, confirmed that Sadrists are running on lists other than the UIA, and said Muqtadah would not issue a statement in support of the UIA. When asked if the fierce rivalry between Sadrists and the Badr organization in Maysan (as in other parts of the south) affected the campaign, he demurred, implying they were cooperating for the sake of the election. Asked to comment on the fact that an Allawi candidate in Maysan had been murdered on November 30 following a campaign event, Saadoun downplayed the incident, suggesting factors other than politics could have led to the killing. He flatly dismissed Allawi's prospects in the south and asserted Allawi would fare poorly in Baghdad, as well. He also rejected

reported concerns about ballot-stuffing and other possible forms of electoral fraud, stating that he expected there would be incidents of individual fraud but not organized interference in the campaign.

15. (C) Maysan politics. Saadoun, who played a helpful role in responding to the violent 2004 Sadr insurgency in Maysan, said stability in the province had increased following the January 2005 elections, when Sadr gained 16 seats in the provincial council, as well as the governor's seat and the head of the provincial council. Once they gained a dominant position in the political process, he explained, they ceased fighting. He commented that the Sadrists leaders of 2005 are older and better behaved than the radical youthful leaders of 2003-2004. Saadoun shared his view that the influence of tribal leaders is waning in the face of competing religious or political claims. But to Maysan's Shia, he argued, the voice of the marjaiyah remained paramount. For example, he said, if a marja' offers one view, and a tribal leader offers a contradictory view, the members of the tribe are likely to favor the marja'. Saadoun also predicted that Abu Hatem's brother, former governor Riyadh al-Mohamedawi, would fail in the upcoming elections due to his past poor performance. He complained about the ongoing chaos that characterizes the relationship between government entities in the provinces and the national ministries in Baghdad, particularly the unclear authorities of police chiefs.

16. (C) Comment: There was a noticeable shift in Saadoun's exchange with poloff (who was assigned to Maysan in 2003-2004 and is well-known to Saadoun), from an open discussion to a scripted dialogue once a TNA Sadr member sat down at the table uninvited and joined the discussion. For example, early in the conversation Saadoun spoke freely to poloff about the tactical decisions among the various Shia parties in arranging the coalitions, including the presence of Sadrists on other lists, but moved to partisan statements about Allawi's list and electoral fraud once joined by his colleague. Saadoun also told poloff early in the conversation that Iran's influence had increased in Maysan since 2004, but when asked later to describe the forms of influence, he claimed he had merely said there was an increase in public awareness of the Iranian role. It appears that Saadoun -- who was not an exile or mujahid in Iran like many of Maysan's politicians affiliated with SCIRI, Badr, and al-Dawa -- has decided to ally with Sadr, and that local leaders like him are populating lists other than the UIA. This may explain why he does not share the apprehension expressed by Dabbagh about UIA conduct.

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